

Section II: Functional Annexes

Purpose

The Purpose of this annex is to establish public awareness of hazards and to provide active channels for informing and advising the public on appropriate actions before, during, and after a county emergency;

- ❖ To provide for effective collection, and dissemination of information, to control rumors and to minimize uninformed public response.

It is not intended to define or supplant Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for any particular agency, but provide a framework for operations in the event of mutual aid between agencies. Special emphasis is placed on the use of mitigation, phased planning, and public education before an incident to increase the safety of the citizens of Stillwater County.

Situation and Assumptions

1. Situation

- A. The Hazard Analysis concluded that the top dangers in the county were Wildfire, Severe Weather, Flood, Hazardous Materials, and Earthquake.
- B. An emergency situation may occur with little or no warning. Therefore, the public must have advance understanding of the potential hazards affecting them and the protective actions to be taken. Pre-scripted Emergency Alert System (EAS) messages may be utilized to pass initial information and instructions to the media and the general public.
- C. During an emergency situation, it is essential that the public be provided with timely, accurate and easily understood information on the protective measures to be taken to save lives and protect property.
- D. Centralized county/state coordination and dissemination of factual, official information is necessary to assure a well-informed public, to avoid or minimize the release of misinformation, and to deflate rumors.
- E. Should the Joint Information System (JIS) concept be activated, it may operate out of a Joint Information Center (JIC). Stillwater County Disaster and Emergency Services (DES) and other responding agencies should operate and develop their emergency public information out of the JIC.
- F. Billings has 21 and Red Lodge has 1 commercial radio stations, providing coverage countywide.
- G. Stillwater County uses NOAA and the NWS to send out all alerts, which then hit all regional media outlets in the area.
- H. Stillwater County does not have a daily newspaper and relies on the Billings Gazette for daily printed news. The Stillwater County News provides weekly news information for most of the county, with maybe the exception of Park City which relies more on the Laurel Outlook for weekly news information in print.
- I. The Stillwater County News is distributed throughout the county.

2. Assumptions

- A. A public education and information program will help save lives and property during

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emergencies and disasters if the public knows how to prepare for them.

- B. Information is one of the first casualties of a disaster. Rumor abound and information is sketchy at best. It may be hours before officials know the facts. The lack information or contradictory information will cause confusion.
- C. In an emergency situation, the public will demand information about the emergency. The local print and broadcast media will perform an essential role in providing emergency instructions and status information to the public.
- D. Depending on the severity of the emergency or the media's conception of the severity of the emergency, regional and national media also will demand information, and may play a role in reassuring, or alarming, distant relatives of the disaster area population.
- E. Telephone communications may be disrupted or overloaded. Local and regional radio/television stations without emergency power may be off the air for lengthy periods of time.

Concept of Operations

1. General

The Town of Columbus/Stillwater County is committed to a proactive public information program during a disaster or emergency.

Notification of citizens should be made as soon as possible via the Automated Emergency Alert System (EAS), the "E911" system, mobile PA systems, and local radio/TV broadcasts. The DESC or his deputy should activate the EAS by contacting the **NWS (1-406-652-3214/ 1-800-240-4596)** to initiate a public broadcast message.

- ❖ **EAS (Emergency Alert System):** The Emergency Alert System has replaced the Emergency Broadcast System as the primary digitized warning system for the South Eastern Regional Area, which includes Stillwater County. The system is designed to provide a 24-hour warning point to the public for emergencies and disasters. Stillwater County uses NOAA and the NWS as it contact which then sends out all alerts to the mass media. They have generators and backup power to enable broadcasting during power outages. This makes it essential for people to have battery powered radios to receive these important messages during times of emergency.

At the earliest convenience, updates and important information should also be placed on the County Website.

- Stillwater County public information and education program should:
 - A. Provide support during the four phases of emergency management: mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery operations.
 - B. Provide the public with accurate, timely, and easily understood event-related information concerning protective actions, route restrictions, health notices, and emergency assistance information.
 - C. Control rumors.
 - D. Coordinate information releases with all participating public and private agencies, emergency

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responders, and all levels of government to support public officials and media representatives in satisfying the public's demand for accurate and consistent information.

- E. Limit public information activities to County-specific events and actions. Federal and State governments are responsible for information related to their jurisdiction.
- The County's Incident Command System (ICS), Emergency Operations Center (EOC), and Joint Information Center (JIC) should support public information.
 - A. The County DES PIO or an alternate may serve as spokesperson for the EOC and Incident Commander (IC) during an emergency situation. Organizations not represented by the EOC may use their own PIO.
 - B. The DES PIO should issue news releases on behalf of the county after coordinating current information with other agencies. Member(s) of the EOC and cooperating partners should receive copies of all releases. EOC and/or IC approval is required before issuing policy-related news releases. All press releases should also be posted to the city/county web site.

Direction and Control

- See Annex A in Section II: Functional Annexes.
- The DES Coordinator is responsible for all pre-emergency education and information programs. Tasks may be delegated to the PIO as necessary.
- The overall responsibility for public information in an incident rests with the Incident Commander (IC) acting through the IC's Information Officer (IO), when designated. In the absence of such a public information officer, information should be made available from the EOC.
- For larger-scale emergencies, the EOC should provide public information through its appointed PIO.
- All information releases should be coordinated with the IC, (or designated representative) for approval prior to release to the public/media.
- News releases from other facilities, counties or state-level events should be coordinated with their appropriate representatives.
- **Joint Information Center (JIC):**
 - Preceding or during extreme emergency situations, a Joint Information Center may be activated. The JIC is established to provide a single coordinated focal point for all current official public information.
 - The JIC should be organized and activated by DES in the EOC.
 - Once a JIC is established, news releases, instructions, or official information originated by the various participating organizations should be channeled and verified through the JIC to ensure less risk of conflicting statements.
 - A Media Center should be organized at the JIC where media staff (television, radio, and print) can receive up-to-date information regarding the incident.
 - Visitors to the JIC should be limited to County, State, Federal, or other appropriate organizations, and members of the media.
 - Briefing schedules and news statements should be made available to the media.

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- The JIC should be declared operational when the DES PIO, or alternate, is present, as well as sufficient personnel to perform incoming inquiries and administrative functions. The county JIC Initiating Checklist is found at Appendix ____.
- The JIC, when operational, should serve as a location where most incident-related inquiries from the citizenry may be directed. Some inquiries, such as those involving claims, may be routed to another location.
- **Public Inquiry:**
 - If a JIC is not operational, a Public Inquiry Center (PIC) should be established to provide a single point of contact for the general public to call and receive current, accurate information regarding a specific event or threat. The DESC also manages and coordinates staffing of the PIC using trained volunteers.
 - Currently, the Stillwater County PIC consists of three “informational hotline” telephones manned by volunteers in the EOC as available.
 - The PIC serves a dual purpose. It disseminates information by responding to requests from the public and gathers information by identifying trends, inaccurate information, misunderstandings, or misconceptions reported by the public or reflected by their inquiries. If the misunderstandings indicate an isolated concern, the PIC staff should address the matter directly with the caller. If a pattern of confusion emerges, they should notify the JIC (if operational), which then addresses the situation through the news media using traditional tools such as news releases and news conferences. If the JIC is not operational, the operator should notify the DESC to take action.
 - Until the EOC is activated and the PIC Hotlines are operational, answers to queries from the public should be provided by the DESC, coordinating with the ICP.
 - The telephone numbers for the PIC Hotlines should be released to the local news media for dissemination to the public by the EAS.
 - Emergency information should also be posted and updated regularly on the County and City Websites.

Operational Roles and Responsibilities

- **Stillwater County DES Coordinator**

- Mitigation Phase**

- Establish an effective County emergency public information and education organization.
 - Conduct vigorous public awareness campaigns to educate the public of dangers from potential hazards and provide them with information on the actions necessary to save lives and protect property.
 - Stress hazard awareness and personal preparedness in presentations with the media, schools and service clubs.
 - Stay current or familiar with the latest techniques for emergency management information.
 - Meet regularly with members of the media to foster a close working relationship.
 - Familiarize the media with this annex. Consider their recommendations to improve it.

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- Identify private resources to assist in the public education and information process.
- Include the media in the planning process.
- Conduct a Disaster Preparedness Month annually in September. Publicize disaster preparedness that month in the media and in speeches to service clubs and schools.
- Conduct an Earthquake Preparedness Month each October in commemoration with the state of the great earthquakes that have struck the state.
- Stress winter safety in November.
- Stress flood preparedness in April to remind the public to mitigate flooding and to buy flood insurance.

Preparedness Phase

- Disseminate emergency information and instructions to the public, to include, if necessary, twenty-four hour telephone numbers.
- Plan and coordinate with the local news media to assure assistance in disseminating emergency information and instructions.
- Designate a facility where media representatives can be briefed.
- Involve the media in exercise critiques.
- Test the EAS at least annually.
- Prepare situation status boards to record information on disasters or emergencies.
- Review and update this annex.
- Maintain office and home telephone numbers of key contact personnel for each radio and TV station, and the newspapers in Billings, Columbus and Laurel.

Response Phase

- Inform the public through the EAS. Ensure that the EAS is not overly used to cause undue public concern.
- Ensure the media has access to the EOC.
- Appoint a PIO. If the primary PIO is not available, the new PIO should be experienced in the roles and responsibilities of a Public Information Officer.
- Determine the need for and activate JIC.
- When the JIC is activated, organize a sufficient group of personnel to permit extended hours of operation during an emergency or disaster, if needed.

Recovery Phase

- Continue public information operations as long as required by the IC/EOC.
- Provide news releases with major emphasis on:
 - Types and locations of emergency assistance available including contacts, phone numbers, location(s) (e.g. food and water points), information concerning disaster claims application centers, and trash and debris disposal instructions;
 - Public Health Notices;
 - Restricted areas;
 - Movement or travel restrictions;
 - Contacts and phone numbers for missing person information;

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- Contacts and phone numbers for local non-emergency assistance; and
- Public safety notices.
- Stress mitigation efforts, structural and non-structural, to department heads involved in recovery efforts.
- Assess effectiveness of public information and education program.

■ **Stillwater County Public Information Officer:**

Mitigation Phase

- Stay current of familiar with the latest techniques for emergency management information.
- Meet regularly with members of the media to foster a close working relationship.
- Conduct public education and media programs as needed.

- Preparedness Phase
- Maintain close liaison with local, state, and federal PIO's as well as the media to enhance public preparedness and awareness prior to an emergency, and to facilitate dissemination of actual incident information.
- Participate in emergency drills and exercises to test plans for effective and consistent information release.
- Attend PIO conferences and training sessions.
- Compile and prepare emergency information for the public in case of an emergency.
- Become aware of the procedures to utilize the Emergency Alert System. Persons designated as PIOs may assist in preparation of EAS messages and should monitor all EAS announcements.
- Coordinate public education/awareness campaigns with the DES office.

Response Phase

- Reports to the EOC, upon activation.
- Contact the media and informs them about the emergency.
- Serves as an official Stillwater County spokesperson and the sole source for dissemination of official emergency related materials to the public. Remind agency heads to clear all releases through you.
- Supervises the preparation of emergency announcements for EAS broadcast.
- Activates the Public Information web site and regularly updates it with the latest information.
- Coordinates all public announcements with the Incident Commander.
- Issues news media releases from the EOC, or, if activated, establishes and coordinates all actions at the Joint Information Center (JIC).
- Provides for briefings with the participation of the CEO and other involved officials.
- Coordinates news releases with parties involved in an emergency and the State DES PIO.
- Verifies the authenticity of incoming information.
- Verifies that duplicate or contradictory releases are not being made.
- Takes action to maintain control of rumors.

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- Coordinates with the American Red Cross to establish a single point of contact for the public to obtain information concerning missing relatives.
- Public Information Officers should provide news releases that emphasize the following:
 - A clear identification of the affected area
 - Timely, accurate and easily understood information on the situation.
 - Recommended or ordered protective actions.
 - Descriptions of local, State and Federal response to the emergency.
 - Identification of stations and times for information updates.
- At the end of an emergency situation, request that broadcast media announce the end of the emergency at regular intervals to ensure complete dissemination to the public.

- After an emergency is terminated, continue to provide information to the media concerning recovery operations.
- Maintains current files and accurate records of all information released to the public and media which should include, but not be limited to:
 - Name, agency, and phone number of the release initiator.
 - Text, tape, or video of the news release.
 - Substantiating information for the release.
 - Date and time information received.
 - Date and time information released.
 - How and to whom the news release was issued.
- These or similar responsibilities should apply to any PIO working in the Stillwater County JIC.

Recovery Phase

- Maintain status board.
- Continues to brief the media about continuing developments.
- Critique the public information response to the emergency with the media, DESC and agency heads.
- Incorporate appropriate recommendations to revise the plan.
- Release available statistics on disaster damage, injuries and fatalities.
- Inform the public on available assistance – and the location of shelters and disaster assistance centers.
- Provide the media information on the progress of recovery efforts.

- Considerations and Implementations Responsibilities
- Rumor Control
 - Rumor Control is vital during emergency operations. Sensitive or critical information must be authorized and verified before release. Unconfirmed rumors or information from unauthorized sources may be responded to in the following manner:
 - “We will not confirm until we have been able to check out the information through authorized sources. Once we have confirmed information, we will release it to all members of the press at the same time.”

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- Do not release information that might hinder emergency response, prejudice the outcome of an investigation, or pose a further threat to public safety. Examples include:
 - Personal conjecture about the course of the emergency or the conduct of response.
 - Speculation.
 - Demeaning information/statements.
 - Information that might compromise the effectiveness of response and recovery.
- Confidential Information
 - Confidential information is not to be released. This includes:
 - The names of victims or fatalities prior to notification of next-of-kin. (Identification and cause of death shall not be released without authorization from the Coroner).
 - Home phone numbers of city/county personnel and volunteer emergency workers, fire station numbers, and unpublished city/county numbers.
- Media Access to the Scene
 - Every effort should be made to allow the media access to the disaster area, consistent with safety.
 - In cooperation with the EOC and on-scene personnel, the Incident Commander may allow media representatives restricted access to the scene, accompanied by a member of the Public Information staff. This should be done with regard to the safety of media personnel, the impact on response, and the wishes and concerns of the victims.
 - The Public Information Officer should not allow media to the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) except under limited, controlled circumstances, and only with prior approval of the Incident Commander or EOC Manager. Before being admitted to the EOC, media representatives shall display appropriate identification and shall be escorted by a member of the Public Information staff.
 - If it is not safe or practical to admit all media representatives to the scene, a media “pool” may be created, where media representatives select one camera crew to take video footage for all. If even such controlled access is impractical, a “staged” photo opportunity to tape response vehicles or support activities may satisfy the media's need for video footage.
 - Response personnel must be protected from unwanted media intrusion. Off-shift personnel should be provided uninterrupted rest. It may be necessary to provide security to facilities where response personnel are housed and disconnect the telephones to ensure privacy.
- Victims and families should have access to public officials without having to face media.

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Try to provide a secure entrance to the city/county administrative offices, or arrange a briefing/interview room away from the media.

- Then media may be allowed access to response personnel at the discretion of the Incident Commander, only if such an interview does not interfere with the response efforts.
- Response personnel should not comment on the incident without knowledge and consent of the Public Information Officer or IC.
- Administration and Logistics.
- The DESC is responsible for the acquisition of appropriate equipment and supplies to support the public information and education program, and to ensure rapid activation of the JIC if necessary.
- Selection and training of persons to provide emergency information support services to the EOC and the JIC will be under the direct supervision of the DESC.